

Aldabra Giant Tortoise

Geochelone gigantea

gee-oh-chel-own jye-gan-tee-ah

Description

The Aldabra giant tortoise is the second largest tortoise in the world. They can weigh up to 250 kilograms and grow to 1.2 metres long. They have huge shells – carapaces – made from bone and keratin. The Aldabra giant tortoise also has another shell plate called a ‘nuchal scute’. This is at the front of their carapace, directly behind their head, and acts, alongside the other plates, as protection. The males are larger and have longer tails than the females.



Speed Factor

Slow

Moving at an average speed of just 4.57 metres a minute, the Aldabra giant tortoise is the most sluggish of all tortoises. Even with the incentive of food or potential suitors, Aldabra giant tortoises are happy to plod along at a relaxed pace. And in a 24-hour period, these giants will sleep for around 20 hours!

Conservation Status

Vulnerable

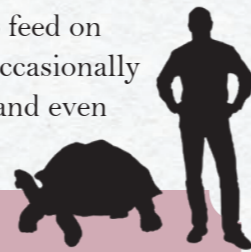
In the 1980s, scientists and conservationists helped to slow the decline of the Aldabra giant tortoise population by listing their home, the Aldabra Atoll, as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The peak of their decline was in the 1870s and was due to years of hunting by sailors and predation of eggs. Hungry sailors would store the tortoises on ship voyages and eat them over time. Fortunately, after years of conservation efforts, their population increased from approximately 1000 to 100 000 individuals by 1997.

Location/Habitat

The Aldabra giant tortoise predominantly lives in the Aldabra Atoll, which is located in the Seychelles in the Indian Ocean. The Aldabra Atoll is a ring-shaped island, which features coral reefs around a lagoon, and is the second-largest coral atoll in the world. Here, the tortoises inhabit beautiful mangrove swamps, scrublands and coastal dunes. Prior to the 1500s, they also inhabited Madagascar, Mauritius and the central Seychelles islands, but mass hunting led to their disappearance in these areas. Eventual improvements to their population allowed conservationists in 2018 to reintroduce the Aldabra giant tortoise to these locations.

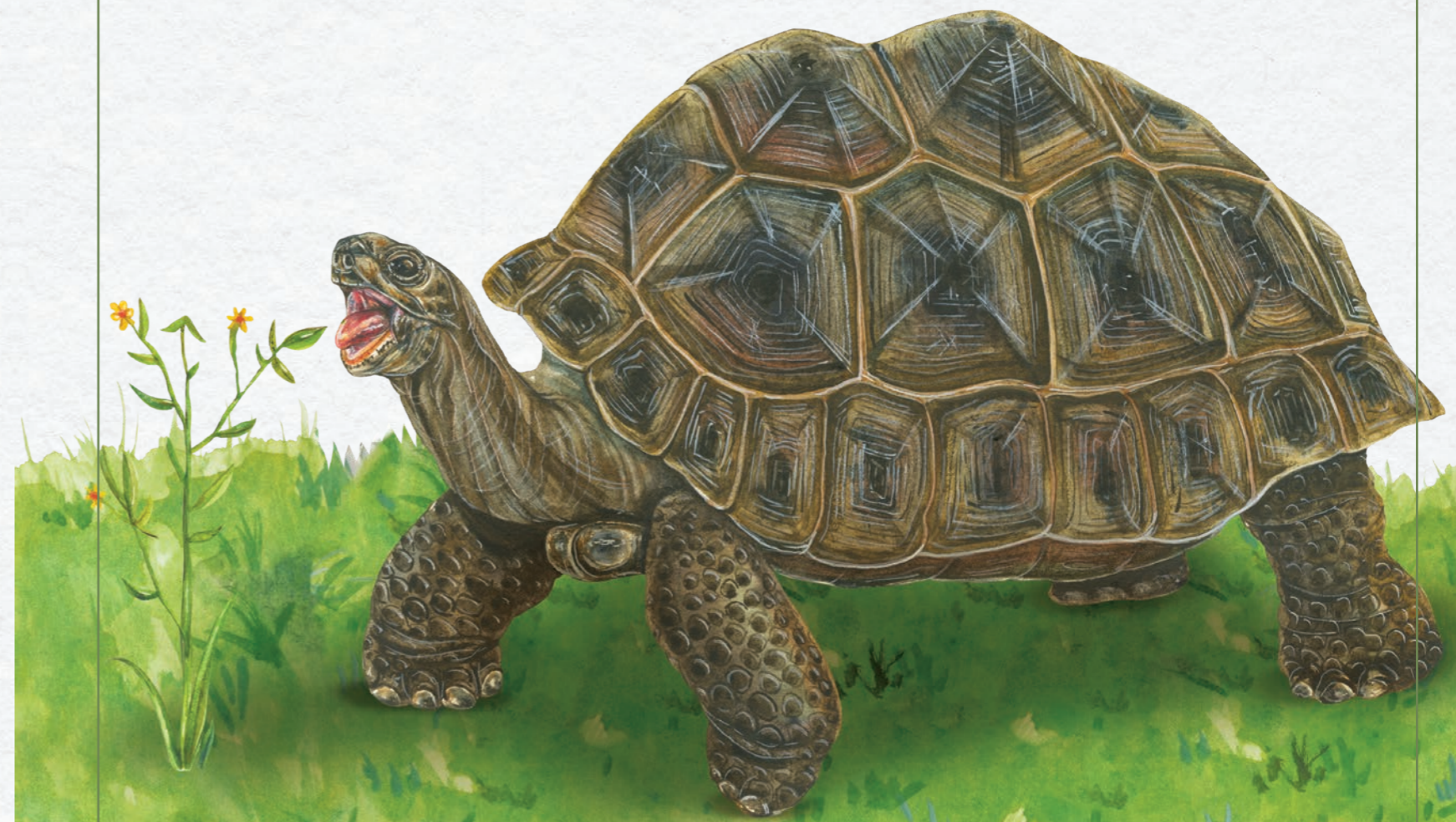
Diet

These tortoises are lovers of grasses and plants, often bowling over trees to feed on leaves and vegetation. They also occasionally feed on the meat from dead crabs and even fellow Aldabra giant tortoises.



Fun Facts

- Aldabra giant tortoises cover themselves in mud to cool down and protect their skin from pesky mosquitoes.
- Out of 25 eggs, typically only five will survive and make it into hatchlings.
- These tortoises can last months without food or water as they have plenty stored in their bodies.
- Given their rich plant diet, there are many seed and plant leftovers in their poo. These faeces have become a highly sought-after food source for animals like hermit crabs.



Geochelone gigantea

Basset Hound

Canis lupus familiaris

kan-is loo-pus fam-il-ee-are-is

Description

The basset hound is a dog whose eyes, ears and mouth are droopy. While originally bred for hunting, these medium-sized dogs have since been domesticated and make popular pets because of their charming nature and humorous personalities. Reaching an average height of 41–53 centimetres and weight of 18–30 kilograms, their short, smooth coats are most commonly reddish brown, black, tan and white.

Speed Factor

Slow

Basset hounds are one of the slowest dog breeds when it comes to their speed and energy levels, running at just 8–15 kilometres an hour. However, their sluggish nature helped make them one of the best hunting dogs. In the mid-1500s in France, basset hounds were bred to keep a slow pace while hunting for rabbits, hares, deer and occasionally larger animals. Their leisurely speed not only allowed their owners to keep up, but also helped the basset hounds hone their impressive sense of smell.



Conservation Status

Not Threatened

Like many dog breeds, conservation status is generally not applicable to basset hounds because domesticated dogs are not threatened species.

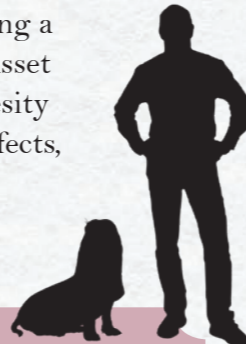


Location/Habitat

These impressive dogs were originally bred in France and Belgium but can now be found across the globe. They prefer cooler climates and have been known to drool excessively in the warmer weather. Since they are domesticated, their location and habitat depend solely on where their owners take them.

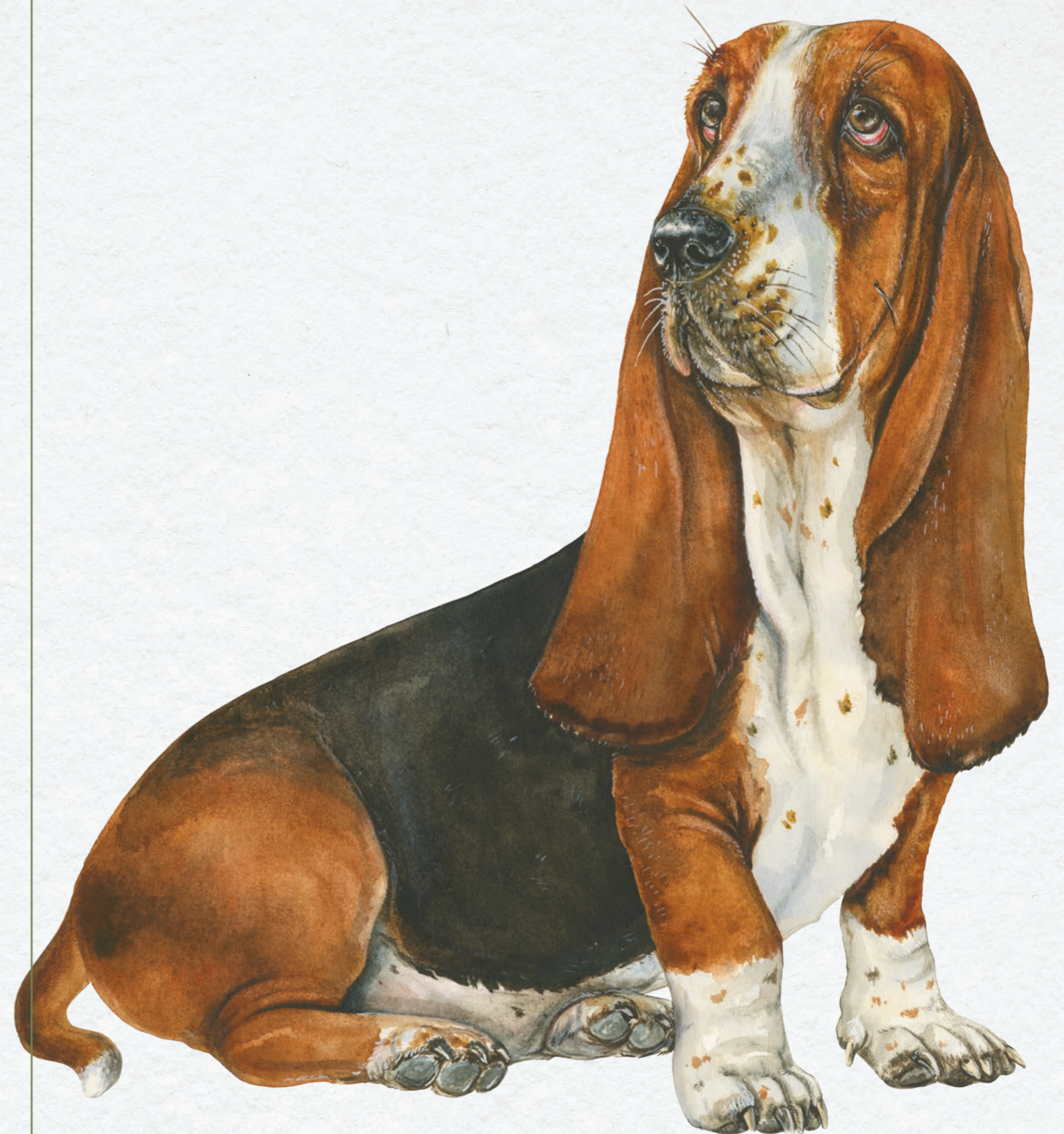
Diet

An unfortunate consequence of being a slow and low-energy dog is that basset hounds can easily gain weight. Obesity in dogs can cause numerous side effects, so it's important for basset hounds to follow a balanced diet of animal proteins, fats, carbs and nutrients.



Fun Facts

- The name 'basset' comes from 'bassus', the Latin word for low. This refers to their low-statured bodies. The word 'hound' comes from the Old English word 'hund', a word used to refer to all domesticated canines.
- Despite being incredibly impressive, the hunting skill of the basset hound is beaten by that of the bloodhound, a dog with around 230 million scent receptors (compared to the basset hound's 220 million).
- The first basset hound was sent to Australia in 1957. They have become much-loved pets in this country.



Canis lupus familiaris



Lepus europaeus

Brown Hare

Lepus europaeus

lee-pus you-ro-pay-us

Description

Also called the European hare, brown hares are known for their long ears, which can grow to 10 centimetres. On average, brown hares reach 68 centimetres long and weigh 4 kilograms. They have extremely sensitive noses, eyes and ears, which help them to stay alert to predators.



Speed Factor

Extremely Fast

Brown hares are quick, able to dodge predators with dizzying speed, but it's when they run in a straight line that you really see their pace, averaging up to 60 kilometres per hour. This makes them the fastest hare species in the world. Brown hares are also fast swimmers. When being chased near water, they will launch into streams and escape by swimming away.

Conservation Status

Least Concern

The brown hare population is widespread, and even invasive in certain areas (including Australia). And while they originated in European countries, like the United Kingdom, they are not as abundant in these places. This is most likely due to increased agricultural use in farmland areas, diseases and a lack of genetic diversity.

Location/Habitat

This well-known species is distributed across much of Europe and in areas such as the United

Kingdom, the Middle East and Siberia. In the 1830s, they were introduced to Australia as a game species (an animal hunted for sport, food or fun). They were later taken to the United States, New Zealand/Aotearoa, Canada and South America. They live in weeds, bushes or clumps of grass in open fields and pastures.

Diet

Brown hares are herbivores and eat grass, crops, twigs, bark and herbs. They are also coprophagic, which means they will often eat their own poo. They do this to re-ingest any nutrients they might have missed the first time round.



Fun Facts

- There are 16 subspecies of brown hare, of various sizes and colours.
- Brown hares grind their teeth and make a sound that acts as an alarm call to warn other hares of potential threats.
- In colder months, brown hares shed their brown fur and instead grow coats of bright white, which provides camouflage in snowy habitats.
- Two or three adult brown hares can eat more food than a single sheep consumes.
- To prevent predators finding and eating their babies, brown hare mothers separate their young and place them in different locations, going to each of them daily to nurse.



Little Penguin

Eudyptula minor

you-dip-tila my-nor

Description

Also known as the fairy penguin, the little penguin is around 25–30 centimetres tall and weighs just 1–1.5 kilograms. The males are larger on average than the females. The feathers on the penguin's back and head are a dark indigo while their bellies are white. These feathers are waterproof, allowing the little penguin to frequently dip into chilly waters while staying warm and dry.

Speed Factor

Slow

The little penguin is the slowest species of penguin. Swimming at an average speed of 3 kilometres an hour, they take a much more leisurely approach than their relative, the gentoo penguin (page 48). Little penguins are agile but slow as they travel through the water. They flap their flippers up to five times per second, but given the tiny size of the flippers, their propulsion is slow. They can dive 10–30 metres and up to 1300–2000 times per day.

Conservation Status

Least Concern

It is thought that there are currently less than 500 000 little penguin breeding pairs in the wild. While their overall conservation status is of least concern, some locations have listed them as endangered, and even locally extinct. Changes in water temperature, predators like dogs and cats, pollution, being captured in nets and encroaching human infrastructure have all had an impact on this species.



Location/Habitat

You can only find little penguins in Australia and New Zealand/Aotearoa, as they are limited to certain coastal zones. The rocks and sand of New South Wales to Western Australia provide the perfect habitat for these penguins to burrow. In New Zealand/Aotearoa, they can be found in locations such as the Hauraki Gulf islands, Marlborough Sounds and Chatham Islands. Little penguins are active at night and rest during the day, making them nocturnal.



Diet

The little penguin's diet depends on the availability of various foods, as well as their personal preference (which can change year by year). Small fish like anchovies, krill, squid and jellyfish are common prey.



Fun Facts

- The little penguin is the only nocturnal species of penguin that lives on land.
- Noises such as barks and growls can be heard coming from a little penguin during the mating season, as these noises help it to attract a mate.
- The collective noun for penguins on land is a 'waddle', but for penguins at sea, it is a 'raft'.
- Little penguins host small parasites called 'feather mites'. These tiny critters eat the oil produced by penguins that helps them to preen (clean) their feathers.



Eudyptula minor



Eubalaena japonica

North Pacific Right Whale

Eubalaena japonica

you-bal-ay-na jap-on-ika

Description

North Pacific right whales are baleen whales, meaning they have whalebone plates in their mouths – baleen – which help to filter food. These whales are 13–17 metres long and weigh 80–100 tonnes, with the males tending to be slightly smaller than the females. They are dark blue/black with some white patches on their bellies. They also have lumpy protrusions called ‘callosities’ which often become covered in barnacles, making them appear lighter in colour.



Speed Factor

Super Slow

Whales are renowned for their slow movements and steady nature, and the North Pacific right whale is one of the slowest whale species. While they can travel at a top speed of 9 kilometres an hour, their average speed is 3.7 kilometres an hour. That’s slower than the average human’s walking pace!



Conservation Status

Endangered

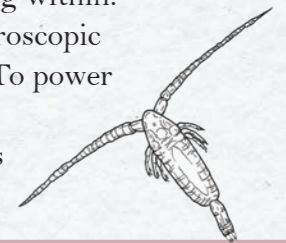
Sadly, the number of North Pacific right whales has dropped enormously over the last 200 years, with fewer than 500 estimated to be alive today. This fall in population was due to whaling, which began in the North Pacific in the late 1500s. These whales are now fully protected but still face threats such as oil spills, boat collisions and fishing gear entanglement.

Location/Habitat

North Pacific right whales migrate to different areas depending on the season. During winter, they reside within the Sea of Japan, whereas in the summer, they venture to places like the North Pacific, northern Gulf of Alaska, Bering Sea and Sea of Okhotsk. Their habitat also changes depending on whether they are feeding, breeding, giving birth or nursing their young.

Diet

North Pacific right whales source their meals by swallowing huge amounts of water and filtering out the tiny creatures floating within. These creatures include microscopic zooplankton and copepods. To power their mammoth bodies, they consume over 900 kilograms of food a day.



Fun Facts

- North Pacific right whales are one of the rarest mammal species in the ocean.
- The purpose of whale callosities is not entirely understood, but as they are each unique (like freckles on a human), experts use them to identify whale individuals.
- It’s believed that North Pacific right whales can live for approximately 70 years.
- Their fat, known as blubber, which stores energy and provides insulation, can be 70 centimetres thick and makes up almost half their body mass.



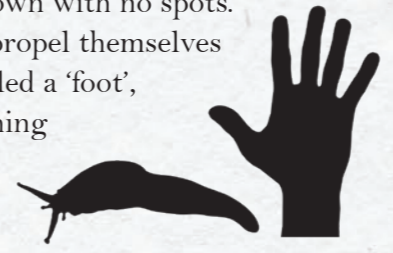
Ariolimax columbianus

Pacific Banana Slug

Ariolimax columbianus
are-rio-lee-max kol-umbi-a-nus

Description

The Pacific banana slug can reach lengths of 25 centimetres and a weight of 72 grams, making it the second largest slug in the world. Their slimy bodies range from bright yellow with black spots to white, green or brown with no spots. Pacific banana slugs propel themselves via a large muscle called a 'foot', and their small breathing hole is called a 'pneumostome'.



Speed Factor

Super Slow
Slugs in general are slow creatures, and the Pacific banana slug is one of the slowest, sliding at just 16 centimetres per minute. They produce a sticky mucus that secretes from their foot so they can cling to upside-down leaves or travel up trees. This allows them to slowly crawl across any rough surface. Without the mucus to glide on, they would be even slower!

Conservation Status

Unknown
The conservation status of the Pacific banana slug is unknown. They are often mistaken for pests due to their size and fondness for eating plants, but they are native creatures. They are preyed upon by forest dwellers including birds, salamanders, snakes, moles and racoons.

Location/Habitat

Pacific banana slugs reside on the Pacific coast of North America, including parts of Alaska, Idaho, Washington and Canada. However, the majority are found in California. Like most slugs, they spend much of their day traversing the forest floors, sliding under logs and plants. They require shady and damp habitats to survive and thrive.

Diet

Slugs are fantastic vegetation, fruit, fungi and animal decomposers. They not only eat these items directly, like feeding on raspberries or mushrooms, but also consume the seeds and spores expelled in animal poo, which breaks down the organic matter and turns it into soil.



Fun Facts

- Pacific banana slugs are extremely useful in spreading plant seeds and fungal spores. These stick to the slug's sticky skin while they are feeding and are then transported to new locations.
- The sticky slime produced by the slug also helps to attract a mate (by releasing smells), retain water and deter predators (due to its tongue-numbing properties).
- This slug's name comes from their likeness to ripe bananas, being yellow with black spots and of a similar size.
- The colour of Pacific banana slugs will change depending on what foods they consume and how moist the air is.

